

# China and the West: Methodologies for Comparison

Wednesday, May 19, 2021, 5 pm to 6 pm Pacific

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**Zoom room:**

<https://uci.zoom.us/j/97329527251?pwd=TGNpbmtORUNvN0ZGeFFkRnglMGlYdz09>

Attempts to compare the cultures of China and the West have struggled with methodological questions. Because both sides of the comparison have developed rich histories in their own right with little direct contact until the modern period, it is difficult to establish common ground for comparison. It is often tempting to be so struck by differences that one imagines that there can be no comparison and that the two civilizations are fundamentally incomprehensible to each other. On the other hand, an approach that emphasizes universal humanity can overlook the way in which the differing historical and cultural traditions impact meanings in the present and constrain future developments. The most common comparative approach has been to look at cases of cross-cultural reception, in the form of travel logs (e.g., Marco Polo), textual reception (e.g., Goethe's interpretation of Chinese novels or Hu Shi's reception of American Pragmatism), or cultural assimilation (e.g., Matteo Ricci in China or Eileen Chang in the US). Occasionally, scholars have attempted to imagine broad comparisons that attempt to link different intellectual currents from both sides of the divide, for example, Daoism and Modernism, or Confucius and Hegel. Finally, translation studies have treated translations as a vital part of intellectual history. For example, the Chinese translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1901 participated in the global discussion of the morality of the slave trade, but also linked this question to the trans-Pacific debate over Chinese coolie labor in America. At the same time, this translation intervened in the burgeoning debates in China over the formulation of race and nation. All of these approaches struggle with the methodological questions of how best to compare the cultures without reducing one to the other. This lecture series will provide an opportunity to carefully consider a variety of approaches to the comparison of China with the West.